

# COSMOPOLITAN CHRONICLE

True tales from the annals of history, archaeology, construction, and restoration of the Casa de Bandini and Cosmopolitan Hotel.  
Old Town San Diego State Historic Park

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## The Phoenix Button

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In preparing for the restoration of the Casa de Bandini/Cosmopolitan Hotel, archaeologists have been conducting sub-surface investigations looking for clues that offer insight into the buildings history and the lifestyle of its inhabitants. In the courtyard a cobble foundation has been exposed--possibly the remnants of the Juan Street wing of the Casa de Bandini that was demolished after a flood that had damaged the building. In addition to structural components, the occasional artifact is unearthed that has a story of its own. One of particular interest is the Phoenix Button found in the courtyard by archaeologist Scott Wolf from ASM Affiliates, Inc.

The artifact is a metal button with a phoenix bird wearing a crown rising out of a nest of flames. The phoenix is a mythical bird that dies in flames and is reborn from the ashes. "Je Renais de mes cendres" is inscribed on the button translated as "I rose

from my own ashes." The button is common in the northwest and has been found throughout the west coast region. Its history is somewhat ambiguous and at one time thought to be from the uniforms of Napoleon's Haitian soldiers. It is now believed to be the coat of arms for the only King of Haiti, Henry Christophe (1767-1820). Christophe served under the Toussaint Louverture in the war of independence that turned the French colony of Saint-Dominique into the free nation of Haiti. In 1811, Henry Christophe pronounced himself king. Christophe reigned until 1820 when, too ill to put down a coup, he committed suicide.

The buttons are believed to be worn by the King's military troops. Each button has a number on it thought to represent regimental unit numbers. Different numbers have been documented, however, there appears to be a large gap in the representation and it has been speculated that this was deliberately done to give the illusion of a larger military, though; there is no proof of such.

After the king's death, the bulk surplus buttons were sold to mer-

chants and brought to the west coast of the United States. In California, they have been associated with the California Spanish Missions and Native Americans. According to Scott Wolf's report on archaeological findings at the El Fandango Restaurant, many of these buttons were thought to be in distribution on the west coast around the 1830s and 1840s documented for both decorative and utilitarian uses.

One explanation of the dispersal of buttons along the coast is their use as trade, possibly to the Indians for furs and salmon who in turn traded with other tribes. The manufacturing location of this button is still somewhat of a mystery. Possible locations of manufacture include Haiti, the United States, and England.

The phoenix button is not new to Old Town. They have been found during archaeological investigations at the McCoy House and the El Fandango Restaurant.

